

# **RUSSIA'S DEMOGRAPHIC TREND: A POPULATION IN STEADY DECLINE**

**BY**

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**RUSSIA'S DEMOGRAPHIC TREND: A POPULATION IN STEADY DECLINE**

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

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The Russian Federation is experiencing a population decline unprecedented in modern human history. This decline is not due to war or a single epidemic, but a combination of demographic factors that are irreversible in the short term: birth rates well below replacement level, abnormally high death rates, and lowered life expectancies. Exacerbating the trend in the future will be the high rate of HIV/AIDS infection Russia is experiencing. This population decline will impact three factors that are inherent in great power status: societal stability, economic strength, and military effectiveness. Russia's ability to project power, even within its historical sphere of influence, may come under strain. Long term population decline may force Russia to focus internally, potentially impacting its ability to remain a significant influence in the global arena. The population decline has the potential to adversely impact Russia's military manpower levels, its ability to effectively police its borders and ensure future military force capabilities sufficient to maintain its status as a Great Power.



## RUSSIA'S DEMOGRAPHIC TREND: A POPULATION IN STEADY DECLINE

Russian negative demographic trends have garnered attention in the news media recently; the fact that these trends warranted mention by three guest lecturers during the 2009 academic year at the U.S. Army War College indicate the potential gravity from a strategic perspective. The subject has percolated up to the highest levels in the Defense Department; Secretary Robert M. Gates refers to "...adverse demographic trends in Russia..." while discussing conventional military threats in his national defense strategy article in the January 2009 edition of *Foreign Affairs* magazine.<sup>1</sup>

The potential impacts of population decline could affect Russia's status as a great power in the long term, especially its economy, military and internal social stability. Thomas Ambrosio, an Associate Professor of Political Science at North Dakota State University who has written extensively about Russia, characterizes three factors that are inherent in great power status: societal stability, economic strength, and military effectiveness.<sup>2</sup> Each of these considerations is influenced by population changes. Professor Graeme Herd, the Professor of Civil-Military Relations at the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, wrote in the book *Russian Regions and Regionalism* he edited with Ann Aldis that "If population size has traditionally been used as one of the determinants of state power, then the protection and sustainability of the population is a litmus test for the effectiveness of a state."<sup>3</sup> He asserts that Russia will have to "adjust its 'Great Power' foreign and security policy ambitions" and intensify its focus on domestic policy and the consequences of the country's projected steep population decline. Herd specifically identifies the population decline's adverse effects upon these following categories: health care reform, pensions, internal migration and

the expected ethnic, religious and societal security dilemmas.<sup>4</sup> Russia's demographic situation is similar to that of several nations in Western Europe, but the causes and implications for the decline in Russia are much dire.

Two sources that exemplify the broad but important attention this subject is receiving in academic circles are Professor Nicholas Eberstadt, who holds the Henry Wendt Chair in Political Economy at the American Enterprise Institute and Professor Dalkhat Ediev of the Vienna Institute of Demography. The attention Russia is garnering from researchers like these is not a recent development. Russia's population decline and demographic challenges have been a subject of study for at least a decade. In 2000 the National Intelligence Council hosted a conference where several papers were presented on the subject.<sup>5</sup> Russia's population decline is not simply a matter of low birth rates, but also relatively high death rates exacerbated by social/cultural/political factors. Additional factors affecting death rates in the future are diseases such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and hepatitis.

A comparison of Russia's demographical and geographical characteristics to that of the United States provides a sense of scale and some perspective. The Russian Federation covers almost 6.6 million square miles with a 2008 population of approximately 142 million, a population density of 22.3 per square mile (as of 2001), and spans eleven time zones.<sup>6</sup> The United States covers slightly over 3.6 million square miles with a 2001 population of 272.6 million and a population density of 75.4 per square mile.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, while Russia's population has declined since 2001, the United States' population increased to over 300 million ([www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)). The data points to a startling contrast: Russia has almost twice the land area of the United States

and less than half the population. The United States can be described as multi-ethnic and multi-cultural; however, the scale is much greater in the Russian Federation and less homogenous. Russia has 160 different nationalities within its borders, with 7 of those numbering over a million and 23 nationalities numbering over 400,000.<sup>8</sup> As certain groups decline in population (ethnic Russians) and others increase (Muslims, Chinese) there are significant potential social and political ramifications.

In terms of raw fertility rates, Russia's declining population projections are similar to the projections for many European countries. What contrasts Russia's population projections from other nations with similar low birth rates is the breadth and scope of the projected decline, its seeming inevitability, and lack of any apparent workable solution to reverse it. The question seems to have become one of not "if" or "when", but one of "how bad".

As a frame of reference, total fertility rate is defined as the number of children an average woman would have assuming that she lives her whole reproductive lifetime.<sup>9</sup> It is generally accepted that a fertility rate slightly in excess of 2.0 births per female of a given population is required in maintaining a level population. Russia's fertility levels are at the lower end of the European spectrum. The total fertility rate for Europe is 1.37.<sup>10</sup> The Russian Federation's fertility rate was 1.4 in 2008.<sup>11</sup> This is a slight increase from its 2001 rate of 1.25.<sup>12</sup> Russia's fertility rate is actually higher than for some other post-Communist areas whose "transitions" to democracy and free market systems are more complete (Slovenia: 1.21; Czech Republic: 1.14), and slightly higher than the levels in a number of the established market democracies of the European Union (Austria: 1.31; Greece: 1.29; Spain: 1.26; Italy: 1.24). Viewed over a longer time horizon, Russia's post

World War II fertility levels and trends look altogether “European” and it has clearly followed the same general downward path as Italy, Spain, and Germany. From a European perspective, Russia’s current levels of extremely low fertility do not appear exceptional.<sup>13</sup>

Russia’s historic population trends provide a better understanding and appreciation for Russia’s present predicament. Demographic potential is a result of mathematical formulas that factor in variables such as population size, a population’s intrinsic growth rate, life expectancy at birth, and emigration.<sup>14</sup> Demographers manipulate the formula depending on what population dynamic is being measured. In this paper, I reference demographic potential for relative comparisons of the Russian population over the last century.

Russia’s population grew without significant deviations between 1897 and 1914, a period characterized by high mortality, but high fertility as well. A total fertility rate ranging between 5-7 implied demographic potential growth rate in excess of 2 percent yearly despite life expectancy at birth of only about 30 years and significant emigration out of the country.<sup>15</sup> The years encompassing World War I, the Russian Revolution, and the early 1920s saw Russia’s population trend decline dramatically. There are no absolute or verifiable numbers for this period, but various sources reviewed estimate the number of deaths directly or indirectly resulting from World War I and the revolution anywhere from 3 to 10 million. Absent the turmoil and violence of these years, Russia’s population potential was 103 million in 1923; however, the actual population was only 86 million. In other words, about 17 million of the possible population in 1923, or about half all the possible population growth since 1897 was not realized.<sup>16</sup>

The mid-1920s through the early 1930s was a period of relatively stable population growth. From the mid-1930s growth started to slow and was interrupted by World War II. The slowdown in the 1930s can be attributed to two factors. Soviet collectivization of the peasantry and famine claimed an estimated six to ten million lives in the early 1930s. Stalin's purges of the late 1930s also claimed an estimated two million lives in 1937 and 1938 alone.<sup>17</sup> Russian population figures in the 1930s are difficult to ascertain with any degree of certainty because of the secretive nature of the Soviet system at the time. For example, Stalin disliked the results of a census produced in 1937 so he suppressed it and had the Census Board executed as spies.<sup>18</sup>

Russia's potential population growth by 1941 was 108 percent; the actual growth was only 68 percent. World War II cost Russia about 13 percent of its population (15 million people) and 16 percent of its demographic potential.<sup>19</sup> Not surprisingly, male demographic potential was disproportionately affected by the war compared to females, resulting in increased gender disparity (sex ratios). Male potential declined 20 percent as a result of the war, while female potential declined approximately 12 percent.<sup>20</sup> This by product of the war affected the fertility trend as well. Post World War II, demographic potential grew much more slowly than before, unlike the "baby boom" experienced in the United States after the war. Postwar growth of demographic potential was modest (0.76 percent annually between 1946 and 1963) and insufficient to make up for wartime losses. This modest rate is more remarkable given decreases in child mortality, and later, life expectancy improvements.<sup>21</sup>

In the 1960s, the process of urbanization played a dramatic role in the decline of demographic potential. Prior to World War II Russia was essentially a rural country. By

the early 1960s most of the population was living in urban areas. Rural populations typically had high fertility rates; however, with the move to urban areas, the fertility rate dropped. This led to birth rates at replacement level only with no net population growth, and demographic potential became almost constant until the demise of the Soviet Union. Life expectancy began to stagnate during this time as well.<sup>22</sup>

Summarizing Russia population trends between 1897 and 2001, the population increased from about 66 million to 146 million, or 121 percent. At the same time, demographic potential grew by only 40 percent. In other words, only about 33 percent of population growth happened due to intrinsic growth (including migration), 48 percent due to the age structure changes (caused by life expectancy improvements and young age structure of initial population), and 19 percent due to interaction of both factors.<sup>23</sup> The U.S. Census Bureau projects Russian demographic potential will decrease from about 63 million (as of 1989) to 33 million in 2050. This means that if Russia doesn't reverse its downward population trend before 2050, the population will almost inevitably decrease by about 50 percent. Although the Russian population will be only about 20 percent less in 2050 compared to 1989, it will be much more aged at that time, which will further accelerate the population decline.<sup>24</sup>

By 2000, Russian population trends were outside the range of historical records for two fundamental processes, fertility and mortality. As mentioned previously, Russia was following a general European trend of declining fertility rates, dropping below replacement-level by about 1970. Starting in 1998, projections stayed below replacement level indefinitely. This indicates general acceptance of a proposition that most European demographers think is correct, that below-replacement fertility will

continue in Russia for a long time to come and cannot be easily reversed by policy.<sup>25</sup> Russia has in fact made some attempt to address the issue through policy. In his book *The Last Days of Europe*, Walter Laqueur wrote that in 2006, the Russian government directed monthly financial support equaling \$55 for the first child and \$110 for a second child born as well as a one-time payment of several thousand dollars, allocating in total 30 to 40 billion rubles (approximately 900 million to 1.2 billion in U.S. dollars) to promote an increase in the birthrate.<sup>26</sup> Two years later, the Eurasia Daily Monitor reported that "Health and Social Development Minister Tatyana Golikova stated that Russia had experienced what she called a 'real demographic explosion', with more than two million children born between January 1, 2007 and April 1, 2008".<sup>27</sup> Despite this spike, other Russian sources argue that the growth is temporary and would slump again in three to four years. Two causes for this downward direction, low fertility and high mortality, are at the root of Russia's population problem of declining total numbers.

The fertility rate will continue to decline because gynecological problems have rendered a third of all Russian women of child bearing age sterile. These problems are often the product of sexually transmitted diseases and poor medical procedures. In 2000, the rate of syphilis had risen by 40 times among 10-14 year-old females. The side effects of substandard abortion practices result in the inability of as many as a quarter of all women to produce children. Compounding the problem of low birth rates is the percentage of mentally retarded and disabled children being born in Russia, mainly due to alcohol abuse by the parent, often resulting in Fetal Alcohol Syndrome and other alcohol-related birth defects.<sup>28</sup> The consequences of these reproductive health concerns

range from increased government health care costs, to detrimental impacts on intellectual capital in the population.

Immigration has not stemmed the downward trajectory of Russia's population. The Russian Federation declined by three million people between 1992 and 2003, despite an influx of more than nine million people from other former Soviet Union republics in the 1990s.<sup>29</sup> If Russia wanted to maintain a level population over the next fifty years, it would need to assimilate over half a million immigrants every year.<sup>30</sup>

Possibly far more ominous for Russia than its fertility problem is the increasing mortality rate. Broad segments of the Russian populace have suffered a disastrous long-term retrogression in health conditions. This upswing in mortality was especially concentrated among its working-age populations. For example, during the three decades between 1970/71 and 2001, every female cohort (age groupings) between the ages of 20 and 59 suffered at least a 30 percent increase in death rates; for men between the ages of 40 and 59, the corresponding figures reached, and in some cases exceeded, 60 percent.<sup>31</sup> Nearly all of the increase in mortality rates for men, and all of the increase for women, can be attributed to an explosion of cardiovascular disease (CVD-heart disease and strokes) and unnatural causes such as murder, suicide, traffic accidents, poisoning, and other violent causes. Between 1965 and 2001, Russia's age standardized death rate for CVD surged by 25 percent for women, and 65 percent for men.<sup>32</sup>

As for mortality attributed to injury, age-adjusted levels for men and women alike more than doubled between 1965 and 2001. These death rates for Russian women are higher than that of Western European men; over twice the rate in Germany, and nearly

three times higher than in the Netherlands.<sup>33</sup> Russia has 10 times more traffic accidents per vehicle than Germany and 5.5 times as many as the United States, with some 33,300 Russians dying in such accidents in 2007.<sup>34</sup> In the mortality categories of accidents, poisonings, and injuries, only suicide claimed more lives than transport accidents.<sup>35</sup> In February 2006, a Radio Free Europe report stated that Russia's crude death rate (the total annual number of deaths per 1,000 people) was 16; by comparison, the rate in the European Union was 5, the United States 6.5, and Japan 3.4.<sup>36</sup> The report referenced statistics stating that of the more than 150,000 people a year in Russia who die from non-natural causes, 46,000 were suicides, 40,000 were killed in traffic accidents, 36,000 suffered alcohol poisoning, and 35,000 were murdered.<sup>37</sup> As a reference point, the Federal Bureau of Investigation reported an estimated 16,692 murders in the United States in 2005.<sup>38</sup> Russia has less than half the population of the United States but double the murder rate. Unlike Russia, in the United States the number of people who die from alcohol poisoning numbers in the hundreds, not thousands.<sup>39</sup> The Population Reference Bureau's 2008 World Population Data Sheet listed life expectancy at birth for Russian males at 60 years and females at 73 years. By comparison, the lowest life expectancy in nine western European countries was 77 years for males and 82 for females.<sup>40</sup>

Russia's dismal health record can be explained in terms of a multiplicity of unfavorable social, behavioral, and policy tendencies. Pervasive smoking, poor diets, sedentary lifestyles, increasing social decay and strife, the special economic stresses of the country's version of "transition" to a market economy from the former Soviet system, the unimpressive capabilities of the Soviet medical system, and the limited coverage of

its successor are all factors. Alcohol abuse is a significant contributor to this abominable record.<sup>41</sup> In 1994 for example, the estimate of pure alcohol consumed by the population aged 15 and older amounted to 18.5 liters per capita - the equivalent of about 125 cubic centimeters of vodka for everyone, every day (about 4.9 gallons, or 4.2 ounces per day, respectively). In short, without radical changes in lifestyles and health policies, one can expect health conditions in Russia to worsen for some time to come.<sup>42</sup>

Pollution is also contributing to Russia's high mortality rate. Many are familiar with the Chernobyl nuclear mishap and some of its ecological consequences, but Russia suffers from the effects of many other sources of pollution. One study estimated that 219-233,000 premature deaths, or 15-17 percent of the total in Russian towns, might be due to air pollution.<sup>43</sup> Another study concluded that for 1999, the mortality rate linked to air pollution was 44 persons per 100,000.<sup>44</sup>

Another contributor to Russia's population decline and health problems is the spread of HIV/AIDS. In his 2005 paper on the subject, Thomas Ambrosio postulates that Russia's HIV/AIDS epidemic threatens its great power status. The potential impact to Russia's military is particularly acute. His assessment is that Russia is in the early-to-mid-stages of a catastrophic HIV/AIDS "pandemic" and "is about to see a virtual explosion of HIV/AIDS cases in the near future".<sup>45</sup> He characterized the Russian epidemic as "staggering" and listed the growth rate of the infection in Russia as second in the world, exceeded only by neighboring Ukraine.<sup>46</sup> He also reports that actual number of cases is underestimated by a factor of three to five.<sup>47</sup> A December 2006 World Health Organization (WHO) Epidemiological Fact Sheet on the Russian Federation states that "The number of people officially registered with HIV/AIDS in the

Russian Federation has increased almost one hundred-fold in just eight years, from 3623 cases in March 1997 to 318,394 in May 2005.<sup>48</sup> The Fact Sheet, however, does not include foreigners or military personnel in its reporting.<sup>49</sup> WHO estimated that at the end of 2005 there were 940,000 people over the age of 15 living with HIV infection in the Russian Federation.<sup>50</sup> The United Nations' 2008 Report on the Global Aids Epidemic used the same number for its 2007 estimate, but also placed the low and high estimates of infected persons at 630,000 and 1,300,000 respectively.<sup>51</sup> To qualify how unprecedented HIV/AIDS growth has been in Russia, the UN report stated "A decade ago, few would have predicted that one million or more people would be living with HIV in the Russian Federation alone."<sup>52</sup> The epidemic is disproportionately impacting ethnic Russians, which may engender ethnic and social friction.<sup>53</sup> This disparity may be partially explained through differences in cultural mores (ethnic Russians in the western part of the Federation compared to Muslims in the southern regions) and geography (higher infection rates in urban areas as compared to rural areas).

There are several factors combining to exacerbate HIV/AIDS crisis in Russia. There is a high level of intravenous drug use and prostitution, health care in general is not on par with other western nations, and the government seems reluctant, if not recalcitrant, in adequately addressing the issue. Ambrosio maintains that HIV/AIDS will adversely impact Russia's long term economic health by causing a decline in the supply of labor resulting from increased rates of HIV/AIDS induced premature death, as well as declines in individual worker productivity, capital formation, and increasing treatment costs borne by both individuals and the government.<sup>54</sup> The effects of HIV/AIDS will reverberate throughout Russian society beyond just those infected with the disease.

Since drug use and prostitution are predominantly associated with younger population groups, an HIV/AIDS epidemic has the potential to compound Russia's already serious demographic issues. Its low birthrate and aging population requires that a premium will be placed on younger, working age individuals to power the economy and generate tax revenues for government services. The Russian government is faced with the challenge of a declining, aging, and increasingly sick population and will be forced to make hard budgetary decisions regarding expenditures for social services in the face of declining revenue streams.

The HIV/AIDS epidemic has the potential for a two-pronged impact on Russia's military. In the first place, the military has to draw its manpower requirements from the same demographic segment of the population as the civilian labor market. The HIV/AIDS epidemic effectively reduces the manpower pool. Secondly, military personnel in general are especially susceptible to HIV/AIDS infection because of multiple high-risk factors such as age (they are in the generational cohort with the highest propensity to contract the virus), sexual promiscuity and use of prostitutes, and a general propensity to engage in risky behavior.<sup>55</sup> As a result, the Russian military may experience problems such as increased accession requirements to replace sick personnel (compounded from having to draw from a shrinking pool of candidates), reduced morale due to sickness of individual soldiers, a heavier workload for those still healthy, and fear of caring for fellow service members due to concerns about infection.<sup>56</sup> Budgetary pressures resulting from the HIV/AIDS epidemic may reduce defense expenditures and adversely impact acquisition or upgrading of equipment. In short, Russia may face significant challenges

maintaining its level of military effectiveness, not just from a major power standpoint but possibly from a nation-state baseline.

HIV/AIDs is not the only factor affecting the available pool of young males for Russian military service; so are some general population trends. Several books and articles have addressed the issue, but the impact of these demographic tendencies on the number of young men available for military service varies among the authors. In a paper on the regional consequences of Russia's demographic problems, Jessica Prendergrast stated that "In terms of security Russia faces a straightforward problem of manpower and therefore combat capability, due both to the declining numbers, and poor health and educational level, of conscripts". She references an estimate that by 2016 the number of men in the age group 17-19 would be 1.99 million compared to 3.46 million in 2000.<sup>57</sup> Prendergrast sees these manpower shortages as posing a security threat to Russia by jeopardizing its ability to effectively police its borders or maintain current levels of military deployment.<sup>58</sup> Regarding the linkage of manpower and combat capability, numbers alone do not equate to combat effectiveness, but conversely, there is a quality to quantity as well, so raw troop numbers do matter.

These health and population issues pose a threat to the Russian military's ability to contribute to its status as a great power. Ambrosio wrote that according to one report, "every third young man is incapable of serving due to the state of his health."<sup>59</sup> He assesses that Russia's "ability to project power, even within its sphere of influence, will come under strain" and that its military might is destined to decline in the decades ahead.<sup>60</sup> Russia's recent foray into the Republic of Georgia might appear to contradict

that assertion, but the long term assessment appears sound, especially versus a more formidable potential adversary like NATO or China.

A 2006 Council on Foreign Relations report chaired by John Edwards and Jack Kemp also covered Russia's population decline and the impact on its military. The report stated that the Russian military drafts around 300,000 people each year, but that about two-thirds of all those eligible for the draft receive deferments.<sup>61</sup> Deferments can be the result of medical issues, such as HIV/AIDS and drug use, or by paying bribes to avoid conscription.<sup>62</sup> Unlike America's experience with young men avoiding the draft during the Vietnam War, deferments in Russia are driven by the harsh nature of Russian military service. Hazing and bullying are prevalent and often extremely violent, driving parents and young men to offer bribes in exchange for deferments.<sup>63</sup> The level of violence in the military contributes to its high number of suicides; 341 were reported in 2007.<sup>64</sup> The Council on Foreign Relations report goes on to state that "By 2015, there will be only a little over 600,000 eighteen-year-old males...If two-thirds of those 600,000 defer, then there are only 200,000 left - leaving a 100,000 man deficit."<sup>65</sup> Jennifer Dabbs Sciubba, writing in *Joint Forces Quarterly*, states that "In Russia, the number of males turning 18 is projected to decrease by 50 percent over the next 10 to 15 years."<sup>66</sup> She also reports that "from January to September 2003, 1,200 soldiers died in noncombatant situations, mostly from accidents, carelessness, bullying, and suicide."<sup>67</sup> If the aforementioned estimates are realized, Russia will need to figure out alternative ways of meeting its military manpower requirements, as well as ways to keep its existing manpower alive and healthy enough to serve. In the long run, relief may come in the form of higher fertility rates exhibited by non-Russian ethnic groups, but this will

also lead to a higher percentage of army conscripts from non-Russian ethnic groups.<sup>68</sup> De-stigmatizing military service by eliminating the violent hazing and other actions that would generally improve the Russian military culture's reputation may reduce non-medical deferments.

Ultimately, Russia may need to pursue a more professional, volunteer type force similar to western European and United States models. A professional, all volunteer force is more expensive to field than a conscript military. Therefore, if Russia decides to pursue that option it will have budgetary impacts that may force some 'guns versus butter' decisions. Faced with increasing demands for social spending to counter the problems of a sickly and aging population, Russia may not have the discretionary funds to sustain the expense of an all volunteer force as well. One factor that may bear on the issue is Russia is not a true "democracy" in the western sense; i.e., the government may not be as responsive to citizen desires regarding funding priorities. It might prioritize financing its military requirements ahead of social programs beneficial to the general population.

Compounding the effects of Russia's population decline are internal migration trends; the depopulation of the Russian North and Far East are of particular concern. Lacqueur writes that "About 30 percent of the population of the Russian Far East has disappeared during the last decade, about two thirds from the Russian North."<sup>69</sup> Prendergrast reports that "Between 1990 and 1999 the Russian Far East lost over 900,000 people to out-migration (movement out of the region); the European North lost more than 300,000 people; and Eastern Siberia lost some 200,000 people."<sup>70</sup> She also wrote that over 13,000 villages had been entirely abandoned.<sup>71</sup> Much of the migration

out of the Far North and Far East has been to western (European) Russia. As a result, Russia may see as much as 80 percent of its population living in European Russia. This is not an unprecedented population distribution; Canada's population is similarly concentrated in the southern portion of the nation. A major difference between Russia and Canada, however, is what lies outside their borders. In Canada's case, it's the Arctic and the United States, neither of which pose a potential immigration threat to it. In Russia's case, its Far East region is bordered partially by China. There is considerable concern in Russia - justified or not - that the Chinese might fill the void created by departing Russians. Herd writes that "The Russian-Chinese border can be compared to a thin membrane between two areas of very different 'demographic pressure'. This promises more rather than less tension between the two countries in the medium - and especially longer term."<sup>72</sup> A more extreme view postulated is that "East Siberia and the Far East have only two things between them and absorption by China: the Russian nuclear deterrent and their bad climate."<sup>73</sup> One estimate is that by 2050 ten to twenty million Chinese will live in the Russian Federation, with the bulk of the population in the Far East being illegal immigrants.<sup>74</sup> Another estimate is that by 2050 the Chinese in Russia may become the second largest ethnic group within the Federation, after ethnic Russians.<sup>75</sup>

The likelihood of the Chinese becoming a significant population factor in Russia is assessed differently depending on viewpoint. One viewpoint articulated about Russians in *Russian Regions and Regionalism* is the "conviction that China's leaders entertain territorial claims on Russia and conceal their aggressive intentions..."<sup>76</sup> At the other end of the spectrum Jessica Prendergast asserts that "...talk of Chinese military

expansion into the Russian Far East seems alarmist and far-fetched and demographic expansion to a degree that could threaten Russia's sovereignty of these regions is at worst many decades from being even a slight danger."<sup>77</sup> The most likely scenario for the near term will probably be economic in nature, with Chinese entering the Russian Far East seeking employment, not conquest.

Russia's many challenges of declining population, high death rates from a variety of factors, demographic pressures on its military and internal population migration have potential strategic implications. Although Russia's population decline is irreversible within the span of a couple generations, it may be extreme to characterize its existence as a nation state to be in jeopardy despite then-President Putin's assertion that "Population decline threatens the survival of the nation."<sup>78</sup> One recent report was quite alarmist in this regard, claiming "The Russian Federation is likely to break apart into as many as 30 pieces by the middle of this century..."<sup>79</sup> It is safe to say that Russia faces a multitude of problems resulting from its population issues that pose potential threats to political and social stability and could generate civil unrest. As the ethnic Russian people become an overall smaller percentage of the total population and ethnic/religious minorities grow (Chinese/Muslim), these large minority groups may seek a greater voice in the political process. If that voice is ignored or suppressed, it could set the stage for civil unrest.

As the pool of healthy working age persons constricts and the numbers of elderly and the sick (HIV/AIDs, hepatitis, tuberculosis, alcoholism) increases, the state will face intense fiscal pressures to deal with the growing health problems. Russia's ability to address these concerns fiscally will depend on the global economy. For example, oil

and gas exports continue to account for more than two-thirds of Russia's export revenue and more than 15 percent of its Gross Domestic Product.<sup>80</sup> The impact of Russia's dependence on oil to generate revenue is highlighted by the fact that "Every dollar difference in the price of oil translates into roughly \$1 billion in budget revenue and directly affects the government's ability to balance the budget, pay state employees, and repay Russia's foreign debt."<sup>81</sup> Obviously, Russia's ability to budget money to counter its many medical and social ills is much different with oil at \$50 per barrel than at \$140. Even without the radical swings in oil's price, Russia's ability to rely on oil as a revenue source to potentially mitigate against its social challenges is jeopardized by the fact that oil production has stagnated and oil exports are viewed as nearing a plateau.<sup>82</sup> According to a World Bank report on Russia's economy, "A top energy executive for Russia's largest independent oil company believes Russia's oil production has already peaked and may never return to its current level."<sup>83</sup> Thus, Russia is faced with the problem of generating sufficient revenue to deal with increasing budgetary demands in the face of unstable revenue streams. Russia's economy is highly reliant on labor-intensive extractive industries such as oil, gas, and minerals. A reduced pool of healthy workers, coupled with the adverse effects social and medical problems have on the overall population's intellectual capital, render economic diversification difficult.

How Russia's military deals with the demographic trends depends largely on decisions made by the political and military leadership. The fiscal challenges for the military are immense. Funds that must be spent addressing social problems aren't available to pay for military power, assuming a nation places their priorities in such

order. Also, size alone is not the only measure of military effectiveness. Training, equipment and technology are just a few factors that potentially allow numerically inferior forces to prevail over numerically superior ones. An issue that Russia's leadership may ultimately have to address is whether to continue with a largely conscript force despite a shrinking pool of bodies to fill it, or embark on a path towards a smaller, better trained and equipped professional force. If the latter is the chosen course, then part of the balancing act will be to affordably size the force such that it can be technologically modern and militarily effective, yet large enough to exercise control of Russia's vast territory against any potential external threats. Alternatively, Russia may depend even more heavily on its nuclear capability as a hedge against an overall reduction in the number of military forces, adding even greater concern at the global level regarding nuclear weapons proliferation, weapons security, and international relations. Lastly, Russia may also rely on control over its gas and oil supplies to influence political goals with some of its neighbors instead of relying on military strength, similar to events seen this winter with Russia manipulating the flow of natural gas to Europe.

Russia wants to remain a key player on the international stage and maintain the prestige associated with Great Power status. How successfully Russia retains its present status will be determined by how successfully it manages the many internal challenges presented by its current and future demographic trends. If it cannot effectively deal with those challenges and social and political unrest and strife erupts, Russia's focus may be directed internally. This may distract Russia from the global arena, reducing its influence in the international community. Defense Secretary Gates

summarized it well in his *Foreign Affairs* article when he wrote "...what is driving Russia is a desire to exorcise past humiliation and dominate its 'near abroad' — not an ideologically driven campaign to dominate the globe...Russia's conventional military...remains a shadow of its Soviet predecessor. And adverse demographic trends in Russia will likely keep those conventional forces in check."<sup>84</sup>

In summary, Russia's population decline and the associated causes will pose significant challenges for the nation's leadership and its citizens in the years ahead. Their effects on the working age demographic will pose manpower challenges for Russia's military and has the potential to impact its combat readiness and whether or not it can continue to rely on conscription or must shift towards a volunteer force. Looming health issues like HIV/AIDS will challenge the nation's leadership and have the potential to be a significant drain on the economy, forcing the government to make difficult choices on funding priorities, possibly affecting military procurement programs. When the effects of a declining, aging, and sickly Russian population on the Federation are factored together, the nation is faced with daunting challenges. If forced to focus internally to deal with problems that distract it from the world stage, Russia risks diminishing the great power status it covets so dearly as a matter of national pride. If the problems become destabilizing, Russia's neighbors and even the broader global community may become concerned about the potential repercussions. The impact Russia's projected steep population decline may have on traditional elements of national power like diplomacy, information, military, and economic remains to be seen. The events of this winter involving the manipulation of natural gas supplies from Russia to the rest of Europe may serve as an example of flexing the economic element of

national power. Russia might be forced to rely more on the diplomatic and information pillars as well and less on the military pillar. In the end, the challenges of attempting to divine the impacts to Russia of its apparently uncontrollable population decline are summed up in a quote attributed to Paul Winterton, who served as a newspaper correspondent in Moscow during World War II: "There are no experts on Russia – only varying degrees of ignorance."<sup>85</sup>

### Endnotes

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